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MACOMB

County keeps up with deeds

■ 2.1 million pages of real estate documents processed in 2003.

By Chad Selwiski

Macomb Daily Staff Writer

With Macomb County growing at a faster rate than any county in Michigan, the county's busiest government agency is keeping pace.

The county Register of Deeds Office processed a record 2.1 million pages of real estate documents in 2003 as home sales and mortgage refinancings continue to flourish. The office, which had faced harsh criticism in the 1990s when the volume of real estate activity first jumped, is now able to process all documents in the same day they are received.

"The system as a whole is a lot more efficient. Every employee is just doing a lot more," said county Clerk Carmella Sabaugh, who oversees the office. "Not only have we processed more documents than ever, we've improved our turnaround time."

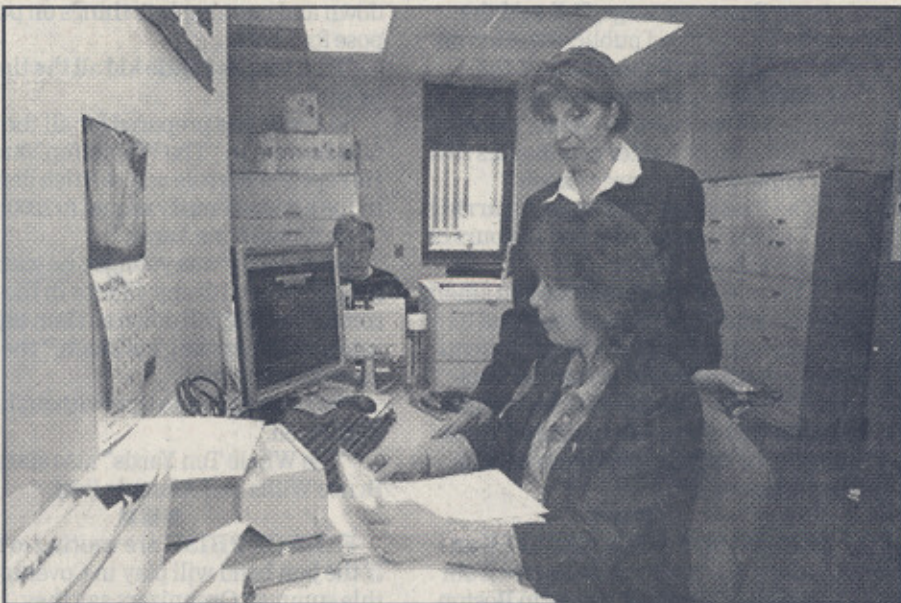
The millions of documents on file at the Register of Deeds are accessed daily by attorneys and title companies to determine if tax liens or other strings are attached to properties slated for sale. If documents are not posted promptly, fraudulent sales or the dodging of liens can result.

St. Clair Shores attorney Paul Garvey said Macomb's Register of Deeds has become the speediest in the area.

"My experience is that the turnaround time, if you use time as the key factor, is the fastest in the tri-county area," said Garvey, chairman of the Macomb County Bar Association's estate planning section.

The number of real estate documents handled by Sabaugh's office reached 389,000 last year, nearly triple the amount handled in 1995.

The office has kept up by doubling the number of employees, from 14 to 28, and



Macomb Daily staff photo by Ray J. Skowronek

County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh oversees the work done by Nadine Forget, an employee at the Register of Deeds Office, which has witnessed a 600 percent increase in workload over the past 13 years.

embracing advances in computer technology. Cross-training of workers, Sabaugh said, has also paid off.

The office's performance represents a stark turnaround after the disappointing conversion to a "state-of-the-art" computer system in 1995. That system prompted four title companies to unsuccessfully sue Sabaugh, claiming an eight-fold increase in fees imposed for document processing amounted to an unfair tax.

In 1998, a computer virus shut down the system for eight days and a year later the system malfunctioned for five days. The backlog in recording and returning documents exceeded four months.

But Sabaugh has won over most of her critics in the real estate industry through a series of improvements.

Documents are processed, scanned and indexed the day they arrive. They are posted on Sabaugh's Web site within 10 days and the originals are mailed back to

the purchaser within 4 weeks.

In February of last year, Sabaugh installed 31 new personal computers with flat-screen monitors to speed the process. In September, the Register of Deeds went online, saving businesses and residents a trip to the office in downtown Mount Clemens. The office now receives up to 100 e-filings of documents per day via the Internet.

The improvements are financed by processing fees — \$14 for the first page of each document, and \$3 for each additional page — not by tax dollars. The fees, which were boosted by state law last year, generated \$12.2 million for the county last year.

The 300 percent increase in work volume just since 2000 reflects the hodgepodge of developments in the Macomb County economy as the building boom continues while the jobless rate has risen. The heavier workload is due to increases in home sales, home building, mortgage refinancings and mortgage foreclosures.